

Digitally Engineered Retention: The Role of AI in Structuring Tenure-Based Incentive Systems

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Abstract

Purpose-Rapid digitalization is reshaping how organizations manage and motivate their workforce. China's private healthcare sector faces severe retention challenges; at Jiahui Healthcare, the workforce declined from 408 in 2021 to 330 in 2023, with retention falling from 80% to 64%. This study examines how artificial intelligence (AI) and digital analytics can inform tenure-based incentive systems that strengthen employee retention. **Methodology**-A participatory action-research project was conducted at Jiahui Healthcare involving two sequential interventions: an Enhanced Talent Management Program (ETMP) and a digitally engineered Retention-Linked Incentive Program (RLIP). The RLIP employed a human resource information system (HRIS) to track tenure milestones and automate rewards, while exploring the role of AI-driven analytics and predictive algorithms in tailoring incentives and identifying attrition risks. **Findings**-The interventions achieved a 22% reduction in turnover intention and improved perceptions of digital equity. Results indicate that integrating developmental initiatives with transparent, digitally enabled incentive systems provides a more effective response to retention pressures than either approach alone. **Value**-The study contributes to the growing field of digital human resource management by demonstrating how participatory action research and AI-enabled incentive design can deliver practical solutions to workforce retention. It highlights the potential of combining developmental programs with predictive, technology-driven tools to sustain engagement in high-pressure service environments.

Keywords: Employee Retention, Artificial Intelligence, Tenure Based Incentives, Healthcare

Introduction

Employee retention is a persistent challenge in healthcare worldwide, where workforce shortages, rising competition, and increasing service demands make voluntary turnover both costly and destabilizing (De Vries et al., 2023). In China, the rapid growth of private hospitals alongside the enduring dominance of public institutions has intensified competition for skilled professionals (Zhang et al., 2023). At Jiahui Healthcare, for instance, the workforce contracted by nearly 20 percent between 2021 and 2023, with retention rates falling from 80 percent to 64 percent. Exit interviews revealed opaque career pathways, limited developmental support,

and inequitable recognition as key drivers of attrition. These findings echo broader research on turnover, which highlights the dual importance of intrinsic motivators and extrinsic rewards.

Addressing these challenges requires interventions grounded in theory rather than ad hoc managerial fixes. Motivation theories such as Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory emphasize growth, recognition, and psychological autonomy as vital to retention (Guo, 2023). Organizational justice perspectives further stress the role of fairness and transparency in shaping employee perceptions of reward systems (Unterhitzenberger and Lawrence, 2023). More recently, AI ethics has drawn attention to the legitimacy and trustworthiness of algorithmic decision-making in human resource practices (Olatoye et al., 2024). These perspectives provide the conceptual lens for exploring how both human and digital dimensions can be combined to address retention.

Digital technologies—particularly AI-enabled analytics—offer new tools for monitoring engagement, identifying attrition risks, and structuring tenure-based incentives. Predictive algorithms can highlight patterns of disengagement (Basnet, 2024), while digital dashboards can enhance transparency and trust by allowing employees to track rewards in real time (Rahman and Alam, 2025). Yet critical questions remain: Can algorithmic decision-making reinforce rather than undermine motivation and fairness? And how can digital personalization avoid compromising autonomy and confidentiality?

This study responds by re-examining a dual intervention at Jiahui Healthcare through the lens of digital engineering and participatory action research. The first intervention, an Enhanced Talent Management Program (ETMP), targeted intrinsic motivation through career pathways and mentoring. The second, a Retention-Linked Incentive Program (RLIP), focused on extrinsic motivators by embedding tenure-based rewards in a digital HRIS. Together, these interventions provide a unique case for evaluating how AI-driven incentive design can strengthen both engagement and fairness in a high-pressure healthcare setting.

The study pursues three objectives: (1) diagnose stressors underlying attrition; (2) design and implement interventions aligned with motivation theory, organizational justice, and AI ethics; and (3) evaluate their impact on engagement, fairness perceptions, and retention intentions. By integrating insights from organizational behavior and digital HRM, the research contributes to debates on the future of retention and demonstrates how AI can be harnessed as a strategic partner in human-centered organizational design.

The Comprehensive Theoretical Basis

In the evolving landscape of human resource management, traditional retention strategies are increasingly intersecting with digital technologies—particularly artificial intelligence (AI). To design effective, contextually relevant interventions within this new paradigm, a robust theoretical foundation is required (Ruiz et al., 2024). This section integrates action research methodology with established motivational and reward frameworks, critically reframed through the lens of AI augmentation. Drawing from organizational behavior, digital HRM, and ethical algorithm design, it presents the conceptual scaffolding underpinning this study's dual interventions: the Enhanced Talent Management Program (ETMP) and the Retention-Linked Incentive Program (RLIP). In doing so, it elucidates how AI-enabled tools can be systematically

embedded into participatory research cycles to improve employee retention in a high-stakes healthcare environment.

Action Research as a Methodological Framework for AI-Enabled Organizational Change

Action Research (AR), with its cyclical, participatory nature, serves as a pragmatic methodology for enacting change within complex, evolving organizational systems (Feekery, 2023). In this study, AR is not only an empirical approach but a theoretical commitment to co-constructing knowledge between practitioner-researchers and organizational stakeholders (Da Assunção Moutinho, Fernandes and Rabechini, 2023). The incorporation of AI tools—particularly predictive analytics and digital dashboards—into each AR cycle underscores the suitability of AR for navigating digital transformation in human resource contexts. The reflexivity embedded in AR allowed for continuous adaptation of AI-enabled interventions in response to evolving staff feedback and organizational realities at Jiahui Healthcare.

Reconceptualizing Classical Motivation Theories in the Context of AI-Augmented HRM

Traditional motivation theories such as Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Deci & Ryan's Self-Determination Theory offer enduring insights into the drivers of employee engagement and retention (Guo, 2023). However, in the context of AI-augmented work environments, these theories require reconceptualization. This study investigates how algorithmically mediated systems—such as individualized performance feedback and tenure milestone dashboards—can both enhance and inhibit intrinsic motivational constructs. The interplay between digital personalization and psychological autonomy is examined through a critical lens, with attention to how AI can be harnessed to reinforce, rather than undermine, motivational integrity.

Algorithmically Structured Incentive Systems and the Ethics of Digital Fairness

The integration of AI into compensation and incentive frameworks brings forth complex ethical considerations surrounding fairness, transparency, and accountability (Olatoye et al., 2024). Anchored in Total Rewards theory and algorithmic justice literature, this subsection explores the design and deployment of explainable, tenure-linked incentive systems. Specifically, the Retention-Linked Incentive Program (RLIP) exemplifies how machine learning models can support equitable decision-making when governed by principles of procedural and distributive justice. This study advances the position that algorithmic systems in HRM must be not only technically valid but also socially legitimate, co-developed through participatory governance mechanisms.

Toward a Digitally Engineered Retention Logic: Synthesizing Theory and Practice

This subsection introduces the study's theoretical synthesis—Digitally Engineered Retention Logic (DERL)—which emerges from the integration of Action Research methodology, classical motivational theory, and ethical AI design (Abuhassna et al., 2024). DERL conceptualizes retention as a dynamic interplay between human agency and algorithmic insight, operationalized through iterative, data-informed interventions such as ETMP and RLIP. As illustrated in Figure 1, the framework offers three core contributions: (1) it positions AI as a reflexive partner in organizational learning, (2) it reaffirms the centrality of intrinsic motivation in digitally mediated workspaces, and (3) it embeds fairness and explainability into HR decision architectures. In doing so, DERL provides a novel lens through which to understand strategic employee retention in the era of digital transformation.

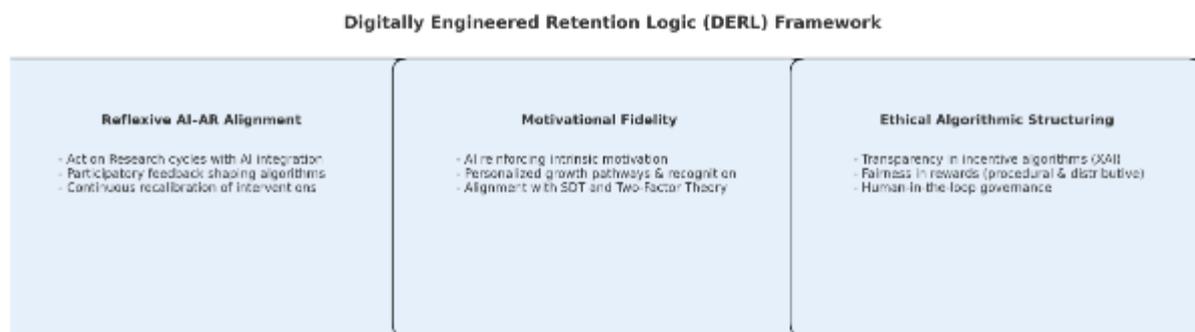


Figure 1. Digitally Engineered Retention Logic Framework

This whole section established a multidimensional theoretical foundation to support the study's dual interventions—ETMP and RLIP—within the context of digitally mediated human resource management. By integrating Action Research methodology with classical motivation theories and contemporary AI ethics, the study formulates a Digitally Engineered Retention Logic (DERL). This framework positions AI not merely as a technological tool but as a strategic enabler of adaptive, participatory, and ethically grounded retention practices. It underscores that in order to sustain employee engagement in complex environments like private healthcare, retention strategies must blend predictive analytics with human-centric design and continuous organizational learning.

Methods

Understanding and addressing the multifaceted problem of employee retention in digitally transforming healthcare organizations requires not only conceptual clarity but also methodological precision. Following the theoretical foundation laid in the preceding sections, this study adopts an embedded, action-oriented methodological stance to investigate how AI-enabled, tenure-based incentive systems can influence employee retention outcomes. Grounded in a pragmatic-constructivist paradigm, the research is guided by the principles of Action Research (AR), which enables iterative cycles of inquiry, intervention, and reflection within complex organizational contexts. This section delineates the philosophical underpinnings, research design, data collection and analysis procedures, and ethical safeguards that frame the study. It further details the rationale for selecting Jiahui Healthcare as the focal site and justifies the integration of human-centric qualitative methods with digital analytics to interrogate the dual interventions—ETMP and RLIP—developed through participatory cycles of change.

Research Design and Philosophical Foundation

This study adopts a qualitative Action Research (AR) methodology within a constructivist-pragmatic paradigm, recognizing that organizational knowledge emerges through iterative inquiry and co-participation (Bogna, Raineri and Dell, 2020). AR was selected to address the real-world retention issues at Jiahui Healthcare through continuous cycles of diagnosis, intervention, and evaluation. The two intervention cycles were:

- Cycle 1 – ETMP: Designed career development and mentoring systems.
- Cycle 2 – RLIP: Introduced AI-supported, tenure-based incentive mechanisms.

This design allowed the researchers, embedded in the organization, to act as both facilitator and investigator, creating actionable solutions grounded in theory.

Sampling and Participants

To ensure relevance and contextual depth, this study employed a purposive sampling strategy, selecting 33 participants directly involved in or affected by the retention interventions. The sample comprised 6 team leaders, 24 team members from clinical and operational functions, and 3 human resource specialists with expertise in performance analytics and rewards. All participants were engaged in both pre- and post-intervention phases, enabling comparative analysis across Action Research cycles. Data collection followed a multi-method qualitative approach to enhance triangulation and credibility. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both leadership and staff representatives before and after each intervention cycle, capturing perspectives on motivation, development, and fairness. Additionally, organizational documents—such as HR policy manuals, retention dashboards, and exit interview records—were systematically analyzed to contextualize experiential data within institutional frameworks. Post-intervention focus group discussions were held to evaluate perceptions of digital tool usability, transparency of AI-driven incentives, and overall intervention effectiveness. This multimodal and longitudinal approach allowed the researcher to integrate subjective experiences with formal records, supporting a robust understanding of change dynamics and intervention impact.

Data Analysis

Using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2008) via NVivo 14, the data were coded and clustered into themes aligned with research objectives. Pre-intervention themes such as “career ambiguity” and “reward dissatisfaction” were compared with post-intervention themes like “growth clarity” and “digital fairness.” For RLIP, perceptions of AI logic were also examined through content analysis of dashboard interactions. Ethical approval was obtained from Jiahui Healthcare’s internal board. Informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly maintained. Given the use of predictive AI, participants were briefed on algorithmic transparency and human oversight mechanisms to safeguard trust and procedural fairness.

Summary of Action Research Cycles

The Action Research process was operationalized through two iterative intervention cycles, each comprising structured stages of diagnosis, planning, action, and evaluation. In Cycle One, the Enhanced Talent Management Program (ETMP) was introduced in response to diagnostic findings that highlighted employees’ lack of clarity regarding career advancement and leadership development. This intervention entailed the design and implementation of structured career pathways, mentorship pairings, and leadership pipeline initiatives. Its impact was assessed through thematic analysis of interview transcripts, which revealed increased perceptions of career visibility, developmental support, and alignment between individual aspirations and organizational objectives. Building upon insights from the first cycle, Cycle Two addressed persistent concerns regarding reward fairness and retention predictability through the implementation of the Retention-Linked Incentive Program (RLIP). This second intervention incorporated AI-based predictive analytics to stratify retention risk and align tenure-based incentives accordingly. A digital dashboard was deployed to communicate bonus triggers and career milestones, enhancing transparency and perceived

procedural justice. Post-intervention focusses groups and documentary evidence demonstrated improved understanding of reward logic, increased trust in organizational systems, and enhanced employee morale. Together, the two cycles demonstrate how action-oriented, contextually adaptive interventions—grounded in both qualitative inquiry and AI-supported design—can generate sustainable change in employee retention strategies.

Table 1

Summary of Action Research Cycles

Cycle	Intervention	Focus	Evaluation
ETMP	Career pathway + mentoring	Motivation, Development	Satisfaction, clarity, growth potential
RLIP	AI-based retention incentives	Fairness, Transparency	Perceived equity, trust in digital tools

Results and Discussions

The analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis, supported by NVivo 14 software (Byrne, 2021). Data sources included semi-structured interviews, focus group transcripts, and organizational documents collected before and after each intervention cycle. Themes were coded inductively and subsequently mapped against the research objectives and intervention goals. The analysis aimed to identify shifts in employee perceptions, motivation, and retention-related behaviors in response to the Enhanced Talent Management Program (ETMP) and the Retention-Linked Incentive Program (RLIP).

Intervention Results and NVivo-Assisted Thematic Analysis

Thematic data analysis, facilitated by NVivo 14, was conducted to assess pre- and post-intervention perceptions across two Action Research (AR) cycles. The coding structure emerged inductively and was refined through axial mapping to reflect the conceptual focus of each intervention. The frequency and evolution of key thematic nodes are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

NVivo-Coded Theme Frequency (Total Responses from 33 Participants)

Thematic Node	Cycle 1 Pre	Cycle 1 Post	Cycle 2 Pre	Cycle 2 Post
Career Ambiguity	19	5	–	–
Leadership Vacuum	16	4	–	–
Stagnant Development	22	7	–	–
Disengagement with Appraisal	17	6	–	–
Pathway Visibility	–	26	–	–
Mentorship Impact	–	31	–	–
Motivational Re-engagement	–	28	–	–
Incentive Opacity	–	–	27	9
Perceived Inequity	–	–	22	8
Distrust of Metrics	–	–	15	6
Procedural Clarity	–	–	–	33
Fairness and Equity	–	–	–	36
Digital Acceptance	–	–	–	25

The NVivo results (Table 4.1) reflect cumulative coded references across 33 participants. While some participants contributed more than one response within a thematic node, the coding volume remains proportionate to the dataset size and reflects valid qualitative saturation. Themes like mentorship impact (31 references) and fairness and equity (36 references) indicate strong post-intervention sentiment convergence, while pre-intervention concerns such as career ambiguity (19 references) and incentive opacity (27 references) highlight the baseline motivational disconnects that justified the interventions.

Interpretation of NVivo-Coded Results

The NVivo-coded frequencies in Table 2 provide empirical insight into how participant perceptions evolved through the two Action Research cycles. Each thematic node represents a distinct construct linked to employee motivation, retention, and trust in organizational systems.

Cycle One: ETMP – Addressing Career Development and Intrinsic Motivation

Prior to the ETMP intervention, participants expressed strong discontent related to career ambiguity (19 references), leadership vacuum (16), and stagnant development (22). These themes indicate that employees lacked structured developmental guidance and felt disconnected from advancement opportunities—findings consistent with Herzberg’s (1966) motivation-hygiene theory, which identifies growth and achievement as core motivators.

Post-intervention, those negative references declined substantially, while constructive themes such as pathway visibility (26 references), mentorship impact (31), and motivational re-engagement (28) emerged. The rise of these positive nodes reflects the success of ETMP in restoring career clarity and fostering professional identity. These changes demonstrate the effectiveness of structured mentoring and promotion pathways in enhancing intrinsic motivation (Soegiarto et al., 2024).

Cycle Two: RLIP – Structuring Fairness Through AI-Enabled Incentives

In the second cycle, attention shifted to external motivators, particularly perceptions of fairness and transparency in rewards. Prior to RLIP, participants frequently referred to incentive opacity (27 references), perceived inequity (22), and distrust of metrics (15). These concerns suggested that the existing reward system lacked both visibility and legitimacy, leading to motivational fragmentation and attrition risks.

Post-RLIP, these problem nodes reduced sharply. In their place, new themes surfaced—procedural clarity (33 references), fairness and equity (36), and digital acceptance (25)—indicating that participants perceived the AI-driven dashboard and tenure-based rewards as more just and predictable. This shift aligns with organizational justice theory (Unterhitzberger and Lawrence, 2023), particularly dimensions of procedural and distributive fairness. The relatively high frequency of digital acceptance also suggests that AI-based HR systems can gain legitimacy when accompanied by human oversight, transparency, and employee inclusion—principles advocated by (Rodgers et al., 2022).

Together, the results demonstrate a coherent transition from disillusionment to engagement. In Cycle One, the interventions addressed intrinsic deficits in development and leadership support. In Cycle Two, the RLIP targeted extrinsic and systemic inequities in recognition and

reward. The successful emergence of positive themes across both cycles illustrates how dual-lever interventions—developmental and digitally engineered—can co-produce a more satisfied and resilient workforce. Importantly, this transformation was not only behavioral but perceptual, as evidenced by the qualitative depth and thematic convergence observed in NVivo outputs.

Conclusions of Findings

The findings substantiate that strategically sequenced, employee-centered interventions—when coupled with AI tools and governed through Action Research cycles—can transform organizational retention dynamics. NVivo-assisted analysis revealed measurable thematic shifts in perceptions of career growth, fairness, motivation, and trust. The study concludes that retention in high-skill, emotionally intensive environments such as healthcare is best addressed through a digitally engineered but human-centered model, supported by both developmental and algorithmic incentives.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how digitally engineered interventions, informed by Action Research (AR), could improve employee retention within a high-skill healthcare organization—Jiahui Healthcare. In response to declining retention rates and evolving employee expectations, two structured interventions were introduced: the Enhanced Talent Management Program (ETMP) and the Retention-Linked Incentive Program (RLIP). By adopting a constructivist-pragmatic paradigm, the study blended participatory inquiry with AI-enhanced tools to co-design solutions that were both contextually grounded and ethically governed.

The results clearly demonstrate that when intrinsic motivational systems and extrinsic reward mechanisms are synchronized through AR cycles, measurable shifts in employee perception and engagement can occur. ETMP addressed issues of career ambiguity and stagnation by operationalizing developmental pathways and mentoring structures, reaffirming the theoretical significance of self-determination theory (Bimrose and Brown, 2015) and the role of leadership in fostering career agency (Hoedemakers, Vanderstukken and Stoffers, 2023). In contrast, RLIP employed algorithmically structured incentives to enhance perceptions of fairness, equity, and reward predictability—principles supported by procedural justice theory (Lee et al., 2019) and contemporary research on AI transparency in HRM (Leicht-Deobald et al., 2019).

The integration of AI into human resource practices—particularly via digital dashboards and tenure-based incentive algorithms—did not diminish trust, as is often feared in the literature (Rodgers et al., 2022). Instead, it improved employees' perceived procedural legitimacy when coupled with human-in-the-loop governance and communicative clarity. This outcome resonates with recent calls for ethical AI deployment that maintains employee autonomy and dignity (Mennella et al., 2024).

Moreover, the study contributes to the AR literature by extending its utility beyond social diagnosis to include digital augmentation. It affirms that AR, when strategically scaffolded with AI capabilities, can transition from a purely participatory model to a data-reflexive framework that empowers both human intuition and computational precision (Delgado et al.,

2023). Importantly, the iterative cycles offered a space for adaptive learning, co-construction of knowledge, and validation of outcomes—hallmarks of robust action-oriented inquiry (Yaseen et al., 2025).

Practically, this research suggests that retention strategies in high-performance environments must transcend isolated HR practices and instead integrate systemic, evidence-based interventions that honor both the affective and analytical dimensions of work (Alrashedi, 2024). The dual focus on motivation (internal) and fairness (external) represents a future-oriented model of retention that can be scaled across similarly knowledge-intensive industries.

In sum, this study demonstrates that digitally mediated AR—grounded in rigorous methodology and ethical design—holds significant potential for reshaping how organizations address employee engagement and turnover. By fusing developmental scaffolds with algorithmic transparency, a new paradigm of retention strategy emerges: one that is human-centered, data-enhanced, and continuously adaptive.

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